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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001241

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK AND PDAS WARLICK  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 MP BOUTROS HARB: BRIDGING THE  
CHRISTIAN DIVIDE?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

SUMMARY  
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[¶1.](#) (C) MP Boutros Harb told Charge Grant in an August 20 meeting that the March 14 coalition faces two problems: relations between March 14 Christians and Muslims/Druze, and relations among March 14 Christians. Expressing concern that divisions within March 14 will result in failure in the 2009 parliamentary elections, Harb relayed that March 14 Christian leaders have approached Sunni MP and March 14 leader Saad Hariri on addressing this and Hariri seems receptive. Harb thinks March 14 can achieve a simple majority.

[¶2.](#) (C) Harb also said he is working on bridging the Christian divide by bringing together two fellow March 14 Christians, Kataeb leader and former President Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. He mentioned he is encouraging President Michel Sleiman to form an independent bloc, which could decrease the opposition's chances to secure a simple majority. End summary.

CHRISTIAN IN-FIGHTING  
THREATENS MARCH 14  
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[¶3.](#) (C) Boutros Harb, a prominent Christian MP from the March 14 coalition, told Charge Grant, PolOff and Senior LES Political Advisor on August 20 that March 14 faces two problems: relations between March 14 Christians and Muslims/Druze, and relations among Christians. On the former issue, Harb said that March 14 leaders "needed to be as smart as Hizballah," referring to Hizballah's recent tactic of awarding its allies with cabinet seats, instead of nominating its own members to be ministers. He noted that March 14 Christian leaders have started discussing this issue with Sunni MP and March 14 leader Saad Hariri, who Harb said was "improving, but still prefers to hold behind-the-door meetings, rather than discussing issues as a group."

[¶4.](#) (C) Harb said he is working on bridging the Christian divide within March 14, and that he hosted a dinner two days earlier for this very purpose with Kataeb leader and former President Amine Gemayel and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. Gemayal and Geagea, nominally allies in March 14, are rivals for Christian support. Harb warned that if the alliance is not unified in the lead-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections, it could mean the end of March 14,

an outcome that Harb dubbed the "greatest service we could offer Hizballah."

15. (C) Harb expressed optimism, saying that Gemayel and Geagea agreed to form sub-committees of advisors charged with tackling issues together. Harb stressed that the ultimate goal is March 14 electoral success, rather than a gain in seats to any particular party within the alliance. Harb was critical, however, of the March 14 Secretariat, claiming he was not consulted about its formation or activities.

POSSIBILITY REMAINS FOR AN  
INDEPENDENT PRESIDENTIAL BLOC  
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16. (C) In the 2009 election, no side will win a two-thirds majority, Harb asserted, and March 14's goal therefore should be to secure a simple majority, which he believes is possible. He stressed that a national unity government was not sustainable because it was limited in what it could accomplish. It is necessary for the 2009 parliamentary elections to produce a majority and an opposition.

17. (C) If the March 14 alliance determines it cannot get the necessary number of votes to secure a simple majority on its own, it should encourage President Sleiman to form his own bloc, so as to ensure Hizballah and its opposition allies do not get a simple majority. Saying that he had raised this issue with Sleiman, Harb concluded that Sleiman may pursue this path if he is confident that he can successfully form an independent bloc. Harb said he is encouraging Sleiman, and

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even suggested he would join Seiman's bloc.

18. (C) Harb said that it remains to be seen how MP Michel Murr, who was formerly allied with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, will position himself for the elections. Harb speculated that if Murr is confident he can defeat Aoun, he will remain independent. However, Harb continued, Murr is pragmatic and acts out of self-interest and if he feels threatened by Aoun, he could join an independent group formed by Sleiman.

COMMENT  
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19. (C) Although ostensibly a member of March 14, Harb often is at the fringe of the alliance and has had conflicts with others in the coalition. That is one of the reasons he is not in the inner circle of March 14 members who must be consulted before a decision is made. His was one of seven names put forward by the Maronite Patriarch in the fall of 2007 as possible presidential candidates. Harb saw himself as the consensus candidate since he believed he was the only March 14 politician capable of winning Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's support. At that time, Harb irked some of his March 14 colleagues by agreeing with Berri that a two-thirds majority was required in parliament to elect a president (effectively sabotaging the candidacies of others in March 14 who could only secure a simple majority). Harb's attachment to March 14 was further strained when the March 14 Secretariat failed to consult him on policy platform paper.  
End comment.  
GRANT